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Opinions of University Students with Disabilities on Current Regulations and Adaptations at Higher Education Institutions

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Abstract

Lifelong learning aims to support the integration of every individual into the education process. Lifelong learning practices are important for people to feel competent and to improve their entrepreneurship and leadership skills. Acknowledged as fundamental as right to life, right to education may be constrained depending on education programs, personnel and learning environment. During the higher education period, which provides a basis for professional and social life, it is important to make regulations and adaptations required by those with various disabilities so as to provide opportunities to access education and create equality of opportunity. This study aims to look into academic and social regulations and arrangements regarding hearing impaired, visually impaired, autism spectrum disorder and those with orthopedic disabilities at higher education institutions in Turkey. Based on in-depth qualitative research method, this study analysed and evaluated the views of students with disabilities on the current regulations, arrangements and adaptations regarding their education process, social and academic needs. The data was obtained with the use of a semi-structured interview form, prepared by the researchers, through face to face interviews with every participant. Voice recorders were used and transcripts of the interviews were prepared by the researchers. It is thought that the findings obtained from the content analysis will support the evaluation of academic and social participation of students with disabilities into higher education and help improve the quality of education in our country.

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1. Problem statement

Lifelong learning aims to assist every individual to enrol in education activities and provide necessary support throughout teaching and learning process. Lifelong learning practices are very important in terms of helping individuals feel competent and developing entrepreneurship and leadership skills. Acknowledged as fundamental as right to life, right to education may be constrained depending on education programs, personnel and learning environment. European Commission (EC) states that regulations based on equality principle apply not only to students at compulsory education age but also to those attending higher education institutions and the graduates as well. Therefore lifelong learning based on principles such equality, participation and social integration as well as improving higher education standards and education for all were identified as basic principles (EC, 2011). During higher education, which is seen as the basis for future professional and social life, it is important for those with disabilities to have regulations based on access to education and equality of opportunity. Regarding the right to education article 26 of the universal declaration of human rights states that everybody has the right to education. Primary school education is free and compulsory. Technical and vocational education is open for everyone. Higher education should be accessible for everyone based on their talents. Despite those clear statements, although it is stipulated by laws that individuals with disabilities have the right to education and be supported in terms of teaching and learning within the same environment with their peers in every level, practices vary based on countries' education policies (EC, 2011).

Current legal regulations emphasize the right to education and that it is indispensable. Regulations regarding compulsory education as well as lifelong learning are very important for education at every level. Within this scope it is of great importance that there are good regulations regarding academic and social needs of students with disabilities. As required by the Disabled law 5378 prepared by Higher Education Council, in order to take necessary precautions and prepare regulations to ease education life of students with disabilities Higher Education Institutions The Disabled Advising and Coordination Regulation was published in Official Gazette number 26204 on 20 June 2006. The regulation is important since it stipulates equality of opportunity, however, due to some implementation issues regarding students, academic and administrative staff with disabilities, the scope of the regulation was broadened. The new regulation published in 2010 there were wide range amendments to about the duties and responsibilities of The Disabled Student Units. Furthermore, during the workshops regarding the needs of the disabled students at universities which establish the basis of the regulations for disabled university students, it was often mentioned that since The Disabled Student Units are under the Health, Culture and Sports Offices and also due to lack of independent budget allocated to these units there were problems in terms of providing necessary support to students with disabilities. The need for more independent unit and better implementation arouse and thus the updated regulation was published in the Official Gazette number 28913 on 14 February 2014 and it was mainly about the duties and responsibilities of the units whose main aim is to ease education life of students with disabilities at higher education institutions and make sure that they can fully participate in education processes (Prime Ministry Information System of Regulations, 2014). With a Deputy Rector as the head of the unit, the Disabled Student Unit is responsible for identifying education, scholarship, administrative, accommodation social and other needs of the students with disabilities, offer solutions and take necessary precautions.

In order to evaluate the practices of the disabled students unit, it is important the know students' opinion about the quality of services provided to them in higher education institutions. The data obtained from this research may be beneficial in terms of identifying students' problems and generating solutions and also helping them enrol education and work life.

1.2. Purpose of study

The purpose of this study is to analyze the current educational and social practices for the disabled students at higher education institutions based on the students' views.

1.3. Method

One of the qualitative research methods, descriptive method was used in this study. The data obtained through semi-constructed interview was analyzed with an inductive analysis method (Akay, Uzuner and Girgin, 2014). Semi constructed interviews are conducted with questions prepared beforehand and asked to every interviewee in the same order and giving freedom to answer every questions without restrictions (Gay, Mills and Airasian, 2006)

The study was conducted in two state universities established in 2006 and 2010 in Central Anatolia Region. Interviews aiming to identify disabled students' views on their educational, social and security needs and current regulations were conducted by the first two authors. Participants volunteered to join the study and were selected among those who were already registered at the disabled students units and who benefited from the units' services. Students were interviewed individually in the premises of the disabled units.

1.3.1. Research Group

The research was conducted with six students with disabilities, two males and four females. Two of the students are seniors, four are first year and one is a second year student from different Faculties such as Engineering, Education, Economics and Administrative Sciences and Faculty of Science and Letters. The data was collected with a semi constructed questionnaire including seven questions. Table-1 gives the information about the participants' age, gender, disability and their faculties.

Table 1. Participants' Characteristics

No	Nickname	Age	Gender	Disability	Faculty
1	Seval	18	Female	Visually impaired	Education
2	Ufuk	21	Male	Visually impaired	Education
3	Talat	22	Male	Orthopedically handicapped	Economics and Administrative Sciences
4	Serdar	23	Male	Orthopedically handicapped	Science and Letters
5	Sevda	23	Female	Hearing impaired	Education
6	Emin	21	Male	Autism Spectrum	Engineering

1.3.2. Data Collection

Students, given nicknames, were interviewed individually and were presented with seven questions asked to every participant in the same order. Semi structured questionnaire was prepared by three experts from the field of special education. Some of the questions are seen below.

3. What kind of adaptations were made for you in order to support you in your classes and exams? If any adaptations were done, were they effective?

6. What kind of support should the university provide to students with disabilities in order to help them to get accustomed to school and be successful?

1.3.3. Data Analysis

Interviews were recorded and transcribed by the researchers. Codes were given to concepts and the items similar to each other were grouped. The data was simplified and organised around specific concepts and themes and interpreted accordingly by the researches.

1.4. Findings and Results

The data obtained from the responses was grouped in seven themes such as registration, awareness, adaptations, social support, communication and security, academic support, service competence.

- *Registration*

Students' views differ based on their disability. While hearing impaired and visually impaired students mentioned that they were sufficiently informed about the courses, students with orthopaedic handicap and autism spectrum disorder mentioned they were not informed about the courses and course content. Emin stated that officers in the students affairs provided enough support during registration and were more systematic compared to present academic processes. "There were more adaptations during the registration process," said Emin. Similarly Sevda, who has hearing impairment, said "I was very excited and happy with enrolling a university. I haven't encountered any difficulties during registration." However Talat, who has orthopaedic handicap, mentioned that there was lack of guidance and chaos and although it was promised that he would receive help, nobody provided any information about the support he would receive during the registration. Serdar, who has orthopaedic handicap, said "Although students affairs helped me during registration, I had problems with the lifts and the toilet which was on the other side of the building and made me go there in five minutes spending a lot of effort," which was also mentioned by Talat. Another student Seval said that she had to wait from dawn to sunset to make her registration. "We were told that we have priority but didn't know with whom to get in touch. There were a lot of forms to fill in and a lot of different desks for departments, dormitories and it seemed as there was no systematic approach, instead there was chaos and every decision was taken at that time because of lack of pre planning.

- *Awareness*

It was found that participants believed that their friends from school and the administrative staff had more positive attitude towards the disabled and that their awareness level was high. Seval and Ufuk said that visually impaired students had a more effective relationship with their advisers compared with other disability groups. Seval said "Our department organises events where we can meet new friends and socialise, which has a positive effect on our relationship in dormitory, restaurant and social life." On the other hand Talat and Serdar, who are orthopedically handicapped, mentioned that due to their disability they drew attention very easily and thus felt anxious about engaging in communication with lecturers or students if they didn't approach.

- *Adaptations*

Every participant said that the support they received on course content and materials was directly related with the sensitivity of the lecturer. Seyda mentioned that as a prospective teacher no adaptations were made to compensate her hearing impairment and that she was shy about asking for any. However, Emin stated that there was a strong communication between the lecturers in his department and the disabled students unit, which definitely benefited him in terms of making any adaptations.

- *Social support*

Regardless of disability, it was found that no participant received necessary support regarding social services. Seval, Ufuk and Sevda especially said that when needed health examination or device checking; the health services were not sufficient. Participants stated that while disabled students unit should organize supports such as scholarship, accommodation and meal, there should also be a medical center in the campus which should be equipped with necessary equipment and qualified medical personnel who can provide necessary support to students with disabilities.

- *Communication and security*

While Serdar and Guven said that they felt secure at school, Sevda stated that she preferred isolation herself and that it was difficult to get in touch with the consultant. "We receive support from the disabled students unit but most of the time we keep silent so as not to make complaints about our lecturers," said Ufuk.

- *Academic support*

Emin thinks that information regarding the disabilities is not enough. “Lecturers should be informed about Autism Spectrum Disorder and how the needs of those students are different from others with different disabilities. I need different academic support,” said Emin.

- *Service quality*

Most of the students think that the name of the disabled students unit should be changed. Sevda said, “The unit seems to exist just to help students with disabilities, and this is a kind of labelling.” Similarly Seval stated that instead of labelling as “disabled” it should be pointed out that every university student may have special needs and therefore support regarding exam anxiety, time management and such. She added that unfortunately although lecturers mention some kind of support or adaptation generally there are not enough adaptations, in contrast students with disabilities are offered to be exempt from that course.

1.5. Conclusions and Recommendations

Right to education is an indispensable right for every individual. Therefore it is of great importance to identify educational, scholarship, administrative, physical, accommodation, social and other needs of the students with disabilities registered to higher education institutions and provide necessary support. Disabled students unit established at universities is supposed to serve students with disabilities (YOK, 2012). Participants stated the units are beneficial but mentioned that they should be given more authority in order to provide better services. It was found that while services during registration period are sufficient, most of the time academic and social needs are not met at a desired level. However, it is one of the main priorities of the disabled students unit to provide support regarding academic, research and accommodation needs of students with disabilities. Moreover, students think that administrative personnel are much more helpful and open to communication than academic staff. Therefore, academic staff should be informed about disabilities and constraints caused by them through seminars, consulting services or printed materials. The notion of accountability should be in place. In order to increase the quality of services provided by the unit sufficient number of personnel who are trained in Special Education should be recruited within the units.

The findings of this research have a potential to support studies aiming to ease the processes students with disabilities are faced during access and enrolment to higher education institutions and lifelong learning environments.

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